

From hard hats to haute couture: how to engineer a fashion brand



Patricia Clarke Oct 2016



An electrical engineer, entrepreneur now an accomplished fashion designer, Latifa Al Gurg is one of the UK's emerging talents

Electrical engineer Latifa Al Gurg channels urban architectural design into her clothes label Twisted Roots. The London College of Fashion entrepreneur tells *Patricia Clarke* how diversity is key to innovative design

Latifa Al Gurg's path to becoming a successful fashion designer is far from ordinary. Based in Dubai, the entrepreneur began her career as an electrical engineer in the city, working long hours in construction alongside her father.

Whilst travelling frequently for work, Al Gurg discovered an unlikely niche in the market, as she struggled to find appropriate modest-wear for her journeys abroad. “I don’t wear a traditional abaya,” she says, “So I would try to find longer tops and pants, and I couldn’t find things that would co-ordinate, especially with scarves.”

With a methodical mind and understated creativity, she eventually took matters into her own hands. Al Gurg left her job in construction and enrolled at the London College of Fashion (LCF), which was running seminars in her hometown of Dubai. After several such courses and months of market studies, her label – Twisted Roots – was born.

For Al Gurg, fashion design is not such a far cry from engineering. She channels her love for urban design into her various collections, each of which is inspired by a different city. She credits this for the brand’s rising popularity. “I think it’s the story behind each collection,” she says. “When people identify with a city they connect with [the line].”

Her personal interest in travel stems from her own diverse origins. Daughter to a Danish mother and an Emirati father, the entrepreneur has always been aware of her ‘Twisted Roots’. “That’s where the name came from,” she says, adding, “When you travel, your roots become more diverse, because you take things from different cultures.”

Al Gurg believes that travel is essential to personal growth, and uses her designs to both encourage and contribute to the travel industry. With a diverse collection, she aims to bring elegance, practicality and confidence to the modern nomad. The versatility of the brand, she says, is key. “People take on the designs and wear them in different ways. I have a lot of people who are wearing our longer tops as dresses, or short dresses with leggings,” she says.

Her most recent collection is a tribute to London, inspired by the city’s weather and architecture. “It was inspired by a quote saying that London is a watercolour painting and New York is an oil painting,” says Al Gurg. “We used a lot of greys and blues to show the colours of the fog, and the colours within the skyline.” The silk textures and flowy trousers come together with the muted colours to paint a portrait of the city for the wearer.

Watercolors of Fog also brings together traditional and modern aspects of London. The lines on the clothes are clean and elegant, like the architecture of Canary Wharf, but the traditional tailoring of the suits and blazers hark back to Dickensian times.

Al Gurg’s recent visits to London are a result of her latest collaboration with the LCF. She is one of eight students to participate in their 12-month mentoring programme, launched by Sharjah’s Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council. The scheme focuses on fostering the entrepreneurial spirit of women working in creative fields.

As a result of this collaboration, Al Gurg has been able to exploit her fierce initiative, and significantly expand the Twisted Roots brand. Though she is keen to expand her brand internationally, Al Gurg claims she could not have started this anywhere but her hometown. “[In Dubai], these opportunities sometimes come without you thinking about them. It’s a very young, growing city. Everybody’s expected to be moving, so it’s very good to be an entrepreneur here.”

Though fashion design is a relatively small market in the Emirates, Al Gurg believes Dubai could soon join the ranks of Paris, Milan and New York. “I think that some time in the future it will be [a fashion capital],” she says. “There are so many people coming in and out, same as in London or New York. It just takes time.”

In terms of her own brand, Al Gurg also welcomes the exposure that has come as a result of her recent collaborations. The designer explains that she has several ideas in the pipeline for November 2016 and March 2017. Though she insists that she will always stay true to the brand’s humble origins, Al Gurg’s Twisted Roots have certainly been planted in fertile soil.

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